



FAIRHEADS
Benefit Services

Best practice in handling complaints

By **Olefile Moea**, Executive Director, Fairheads Benefit Services

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Complaints are an inevitable part of any service-oriented business, but how you view and handle the complaints procedure can make all the difference between a complaint being a hassle or useful tool from which to learn and improve your service.

Ten to 15 years ago it was rare for South Africans to complain. But times have changed. People are more aware of their rights and complaints are commonplace. Companies too are more aware of the need to treat customers fairly (TCF).

Here is a checklist against which you can measure your current practice regarding complaints.

- Do you have a written complaints policy? This should give turnaround times for complaints and a documented procedure on how to handle complaints.
- Do you have a dedicated complaints department? If not at least a dedicated staff member? This person should ideally know all aspects of your business, so that they are aware of how to deal with the complaint and be empowered to address the issues
- Do you have a dedicated complaints email box? This goes a long way to letting your customers know that you take their complaint seriously.
- Who guards the guardians? Put another way, who checks on the complaints procedure? Ideally this should form part of internal audit.
- Is a complaints log compiled on a regular basis? Is this sent to the head of operations and to boards of trustees if appropriate?
- Going one step further, it can be useful to categorise complaints, for example:

- Level one – standard complaints which will be dealt with within a certain number of days.
 - Level two – significant complaints which will be dealt with as a priority.
 - Level three – complaints of a regulatory nature, for example from the Ombud or Adjudicator. Such complaints generally need the attention of in-house or external legal expertise.
- Social media – if you get complaints for example on Facebook, what is the procedure? Best practice is to have someone constantly monitoring social media so that a response can be given within two hours, even if only to acknowledge receipt of the complaint and that it will be attended to. Acknowledgement can be given publicly on social media and then the complaint dealt with offline through direct engagement with the client.
 - KYC – no, that does not stand for Know your Client but, in this case, for Know your Complainant! Who is the person complaining? Can their details be disclosed to a third party or will that be invading their privacy?
 - TCF – Treating Customers Fairly is an important aspect of dealing with complaints. Complaints should be measured and dealt with in terms of TCF outcomes.
 - What is the in-house attitude towards complaints? It may sound strange, but complaints should actually be welcomed as they give the opportunity to investigate the reason for the complaint and hence give the opportunity, if the company was at fault, to rectify and improve service levels.
 - Lastly, can you go the extra mile by sending your dedicated complaints staff member on a course, such as a commercial crime or anti-corruption investigation course?

If we all pull together and take complaints seriously, the workplace and business culture of our country can only be improved.